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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a plan to help high school freshmen with their spelling, vocabulary, and sentence structure. The first part of the plan used the students' familiar spelling words as roots. Prefixes and suffixes were then added to these words to increase vocabulary. Finally, the words were placed into sentences and the sentences were examined for each word's relationship to the sentence as a whole. From these exercises, students began to identify the parts of speech and developed an interest in language. It is concluded that this approach to teaching language is effective. (TS)

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ENGLISH 9

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"I never knew till now." These words from a ninth-grade student were an unexpected but welcome reward for a long-time investment in a plan to help freshmen with their spelling, vocabulary, and sentence structure. The plan was a three-pronged fork, and like its symbolic ancestor it hurt plenty when the lessons were being applied. On the board I placed these sentences: "actively we engaged the alert children in a conversation." "Without much light the deceptive road signs confused us." To the questions I asked about the adverbs, adjectives, subjects, predicates, and phrases in these sentences, I received evasive answers. The hurt for me came from seeing that ninth graders could not yet distinguish an adjective from an adverb, or tell the subject of the sentence no matter how many times we repeated verbatim, "The subject of the sentence is that part about which something is said." (John E. Warriner, English Grammar and Composition 9 , New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc. 1965. p. 35.) The hurt for the students came from their defeatist attitude when we came to our grammar lessons. As I checked their spelling papers, I saw evidence that they needed to understand the roots of the words. The lack of understanding of words used often in television news, radio news stories, and newspaper reports of current events showed how much was needed to help them learn to help themselves. They did not know what happens when someone rescinds a motion. I asked how a unanimous agreement on the appointment affects the appointee. Generally only a few answered at all. I had no doubt that these students were capable of learning; the problem was to overcome their dilemma and save their pride in accomplishment.

To start, their spelling words became a basis for learning a family of words such as accept, acceptance, acceptable, acceptableness, acceptability,

and acceptably. My students and I started with the verb and built the word from there. We added endings to make different words, and then, after we had identified the words by their common endings, we placed these words in sentences and noted how the words related to the other words in the students' sentences. They began to note the positions of words in sentences and how the position helps to decide what part of speech the word becomes. One suggested this sentence: "He accepted the job after school." Soon accepted was pinpointed as the verb with its regular -ed past tense ending and by position in the sentence as the predicate. Another student suggested sentence—"That was an acceptable job." With their knowledge of -able as an adjective ending and the word an indicating that a noun or adjective was next in the sentence, it became easy to identify the adjective in the sentence. After working through many words, the pattern of endings in relation to the part of speech became clearer to the students. Some groaned—I do not deny this, but they also discovered a challenge and an interest that had been missing before. After a series of worksheets, with many disappointing results, there came a week when most of the students were able to distinguish the adjective from the adverb in the sentence and to tell the subject of the sentence too. A sentence like this—"Our usual jobs were not well paid." —brought response that an -al ending was an adjective ending and also because of its position, the word usual had to be an adjective with jobs as a subject. Another suggested student sentence came out as, "We usually work in the morning."—with quick identification of the -ly ending on a word working with the verb work making the word usually an adverb. Over and over again we considered the endings of words that indicate typical nouns, verbs, ad-

jectives, and adverbs. For instance, they learned noun endings: -ence, -ance, -ion, -ation, -ment, and others. They noted verb endings such as -ize, -ate, -fy, -ify and the usual -d, -ed, and -ing. We concluded that these, among others, are adjective endings: -able, -ible, -ive, -ative, -ous, -ful, -ish, -like, -ical, and -al. Finally we took up the common adverbial endings -ly and ily.

My ninth grade students accepted the idea that since the subject of the sentence will not be found in the prepositional phrase, they could eliminate the phrases and soon have little left in the sentence but the subject and predicate. In a sentence like this—"Through the long dark night we waited for a sign from the rescue team."—we mentally scratched out the prepositional phrases, leaving only the subject and predicate as the basis of the sentence. This approach to the problem of finding the subject and predicate helped the students understand and offer fewer hesitations or wild guesses after practicing the lesson this way. The noun indicators the, a, and an were also emphasized and these seemed to help some of the reluctant ones who willingly admit, "I hate English."

I did not know until then just how to awaken the latent talent in morphology that our brighter students had, but once it was awakened such students accelerated with encouragement from me. We underlined the root of the word to aid in spelling. We proceeded to deceive, deceiver, deceivingly, deception, deceptive, deceptively, and deceptiveness. Then we took by the horns that old spelling trap receive. By taking the family of words: reception, receptive, receiver, receptacle, receivership, receptiveness,

receptivity, and receptively, we began to see that the basic definition of the root was similar in each of the words studied. It was discovery. It was learning. It was fun. Of these results of our lessons, perhaps the last one was most important to the students; but, as their teacher, I believe all three are important.

A pride in accomplishment began to show up. Muscular, robust, and boastful Barney shot up his hand with, "I can do that easily." He had to take a word through the family of words and identify how he used it in the sentences. He started: "I will probably receive a top football player award." Verb. Then he went on with these sentences: "Th coach says that I'm his best wide-pass receiver." Noun. "My dad was more receptive than my mother when I told them that I need a bigger allowance." Adjective. "My mother did not listen receptively." Adverb. Barney looked for and received approval for his class performance from fellow-students and his teacher.

As always in a class of English, there are many contrasting personalities. Shy, soft-spoken, and seldom self confident, the lovely long-tressed Lynda finally raised her hand and volunteered, "I'll try one." "I accept my friend's suggestions." Verb. "My acceptance in the school stage band pleased my family." Noun. "My brother and I have acceptable clothes for school." Adjective. "Our whole family acceptably faced Daddy's long illness." Adverb.

"How about you now, Howard?" I asked our most noncommittal class member. "Can I take any word I want?" he asked slowly. "Of course, you may," I said. "I care for my collie every morning before school." Verb.

"My good care helps him grow." Noun. "I am careful of him because he is mine." Adjective. "I feed him carefully, as he is just a puppy." Adverb. There was a gentle, almost inaudible sigh of relief that his performance went well. Other students seemed to share in his rare pleasure of successful recitation.

Our unassuming and confident student who made A in every class chose to use prefixes too with his thoughtful sentences. "I usually conform to school rules, although I do it with reticence at times." Verb. "My brother's nonconformance causes my Dad some distress." Noun. "In science class we discussed unconformable rock strata." Adjective. "Our student body acted conformably when we had visitors from other high school student councils." Adverb.

There was an air of discovery in the classroom. The sense of achievement appealed to the brightest students as it challenged them to seek deeper and deeper relationships to roots in the words they used or heard. I saw the slower students begin to answer with more confidence when I asked them questions in class. The average student began to volunteer to take a word into all of its possible forms. Students saw that knowing these words opened to them greater vistas for creativity with words they may need for their own future writing. They were beginning to use the tools of the language with mental dexterity. It was a rewarding occasion when I realized, "I never knew until then just how to pull it all together."